



THE OPRAH  
MAGAZINE

# GROWN-UP LOVE

A new (better!)  
definition of romance

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about being funny  
on command, sane in a  
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In this month's "Aha! Moment" (page 57), actress, singer, producer, and director **Sheryl Lee Ralph** tells us how she was able to overcome the deep depression that followed her divorce. "I thank my parents for teaching me how to pray and have faith that this would pass and that I might love again," she says. A star on the television show *Moesha*, Ralph has appeared in a number of films and plays and was one of the original *Dreamgirls* on Broadway. She directed the UPN sitcom *The Parkers*, and is currently back on Broadway in the musical *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

**Joan Konner** (shown here with her husband, Alvin Perlmutter) investigates the differences between romance and other kinds of love in "Grown-up Love" (page 158). "Romance is a stage when it comes to love," she says, "but popular culture seems stuck on that romantic stage." Konner has been a television news reporter, writer, and Emmy Award-winning producer and has created more



than 50 documentaries. She is professor and dean emerita of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.



"I've been involved in this movement since soon after my mother died and I became aware of others who were at their end and needed a merciful way out of life," says **Betty Rollin**, who writes about Oregon's Death with Dignity Act in "Whose Life Is It, Anyway?" (page 127). The Emmy Award-winning journalist is a contributing correspondent to NBC News and PBS's *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. She's the author of the best-seller *Last Wish* (Simon & Schuster), about the suicide of her terminally ill mother. *First, You Cry* (Lippincott), her memoir of her bout with breast cancer, was recently reissued.

Former *Forbes* staff writer **Ann Marsh** reports on finding a mate online in "What I Learned from Dating 100 Men" (page 146). "I had a friend doing the same thing, and sometimes we ended up going out with the same guys. We gave them nicknames," she says. Marsh has been a freelance writer in Czechoslovakia and has written for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Red Herring*, and *Salon.com*. She lives in Santa Monica, where she has been dating one of her cyber suitors for more than a year. "The Internet has really changed my life," she says.





Love is (a) champagne and high heels; (b) a passionate, china-shattering fight, followed by an all-night tango; (c) a constant, nagging feeling of insecurity; (d) none of the above. **JOAN KONNER** explores the crucial difference between romance and the L word.

# grown-up love



I HAVE BEEN RESEARCHING the subject of love all my life. First, unsystematically, as a girl, trying to follow the programmed prescription—seeking “the one” and living happily ever after. Next I divorced and researched love as a woman, more systematically, confronting fantasies and failures, possibilities and disappointments, false starts, and at last, beginning 24 years ago, a love that’s enduring and nourishing—at least for the moment (I’ve learned never to take the gift of love for granted).

Now I am on the case as a professional, a journalist who rebels against almost everything I see, hear, and read about love in the popular media. Every story insults my experience of love. Every story offers a ridiculous scenario that results in half-baked romance and scorched lives. There’s the tragic version: Love, Obstacle, Separation, Loss (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Tristan and Isolde*, Erich Segal’s *Love Story*). And there’s the fairy-tale version: Love, Obstacle, Triumph, Happily Ever After (*Cinderella*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*). The obstacles—class, clan, race, work, conflicting dreams—provide the dramatic tension.

In America we live in a culture that glorifies passionate, romantic love. Our friends are in love, dreaming or daydreaming of it, waiting and dating to fall into it. Women and men begin new lives in love. Romantic love is our inspiration, our motivation—our reason to be. Romance

on our lives and our relationships.”

In a documentary I’m researching and developing for television, I want to distinguish love from romance, to explore the ideal of true love, or real love, as Johnson describes it. Talking to Johnson, I told him that it seems to me that love, not

## Love, in other words, is transcending the

is a cultural obsession, an imperial ideal. We believe that love can be found, here and now and forever, in an instant, across a crowded room—or tomorrow, just around the corner.

It can—but rarely. In reality, romance is more fleeting and more dangerous than we are told, more complicated than we could have imagined, more elusive than we’ve been led to believe. Love is a promise made every day only to be broken tomorrow.

As the Jungian analyst Robert Johnson wrote in *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love*, “The fact that we say ‘romance’ when we mean ‘love’ shows us that underneath our language there is a psychological muddle.... We are confusing two great psychological systems within us, and this has a devastating effect

romance, is the love we seek, the love we need, the love that enriches life and has the potential to make us happy. That’s the story I want to tell, I said—a different story of love—and show its appeal to our deeper desires and nature.

“Good luck!” Johnson said. “In this society, nobody wants to hear about it. Even if it is the truth.”

He may be right. Even our language undermines that story. We use words like *settle* and *settle down* when we marry or accept a more stable relationship. We “compromise” for a mate who is flesh and blood if not quite the prince we imagined. Johnson calls the love he’s talking about oatmeal love. Isn’t there a tastier image? The very vocabulary advertises that the champagne of true love is flat.

If we care CONTINUED ON PAGE 190

photograph by Daniela Stallinger



We give love air,  
and we trust  
that the flame will  
not go out. The  
dramatic tension  
is internal.

ego to connect with another.





or dare to look at what those who have thought deeply about love have written, we could learn that romance is potentially transformational but never lasting. Research conducted by social scientists suggests that "romance" lasts 18 months to three years. (Isolde's love potion worked for three years before it wore off.) We could learn that sexual union is only one expression of transcendent passion and human connection. More often sex is neither. We could learn that although the chemistry of connection can occur in an instant, the passage of time—along with friendship and respect—is a crucial element of grown-up love, what might be called enlightened love.

"The passion of romance is always directed at our own projections, our own expectations, our own fantasies," Johnson writes. "It is a love not of another person, but of ourselves."

On the other hand, "Love is the one power that awakens the ego to the existence of something outside itself, outside its empire, outside its security."

Love, in other words, is transcending the ego to connect with another.

Johnson writes: "The task of salvaging love from the swamps of romance begins with a shift of vision.... Real relatedness between two people is experienced in the small tasks they do together: the quiet conversation when the day's upheavals are at rest, the soft word of understanding, the daily companionship, the encouragement offered in a difficult moment, the small gift when least expected, the spontaneous gesture of love."

Enlightened love is the connective tissue of existence—a state of being that exists regardless of our opinions of what it ought to be. We live for this kind of love. We work for this kind of love.

The noted psychoanalyst Ethel Person wrote in *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters*: "Love is an act of the imagination." She says, "Most of us are not originators of stories. Most of us pull our ideas of love from the culture, from the poets and artists who bring this form of desire and gratification together into one script, one scenario. Only then does the average individual try to change the imaginary act into a lived life." In other words: Me, Meg

Ryan; you, Tom Hanks—even in New Jersey, maybe especially in New Jersey.

So love is a story we tell ourselves. Except the familiar love stories have gone stale. Today Cinderella's sisters hold jobs, and her stepmother has a support group. The prince buys Viagra on the Internet, and the king opens his castle to the public to make ends meet, if he's not trafficking in insider trading. Romance has been degraded into a sexual how-to. We need a new story or a new telling of the old story. We need a *Star Wars* of the heart—an epic, with heroes and heroines, huge challenges and glorious victories.

Here's a personal story:

It was our first vacation together, now 24 years ago. We were rafting on the Rio Grande in central Colorado. Just the two of us, in a small rubber raft. No guide, as two inexperienced rafters probably should have had. The gray water was swift and turbulent. Rocks jutted out everywhere, jagged knives, sentries of slime, poised to rip our flimsy float. We twisted and spun in the flow. Now I was in front, then he, then I. Hoarse with fear, I shouted over the roar of the river: Paddle this way! Paddle that! I resurrected strokes from long-gone memories of summer camp. Pull the paddle! Push the paddle! (No time for feathering now.) We traveled like smoke in a breeze, for miles it seemed, when abruptly the river veered right and a tall

wall of rock appeared directly in our path. "Back, back," I screamed. "Stroke! Back!" Though he must have heard, he did not heed me. He'd gone to camp, too—Boy Scout camp. He did what he had to do, issued orders of his own—not that I could see or hear beyond myself at that moment. Miraculously, we cleared the wall and headed into a lull in the river. In frustration and fatigue, I announced: "We have conceptual differences!" To which he answered: "Shut up and paddle." Not exactly what I might have dreamed of. But we were safe after all, and in relief and disillusion, we laughed and kept paddling down the canyon.

What is a story if not a metaphor, a myth in the making?

Love is a raft in a swiftly moving river, scant protection against rapids and rocks, a private place of smells and tastes, eloquent looks and intimate touch, a cache of common dreams and accumulated history. We seek its secret, but it is as individual as one's own face, hidden even from ourselves. Me, Joan; you, Al. We have conceptual differences. We *are* conceptual differences. We don't even pull into the driveway the same way. But isn't that where love begins, in the difference—the otherness—that makes love possible, and necessary?

Love is the mystery of union, the distance to be transcended, the fuel to cross an infinity. It's another kind of math. Two times Love equals One. We are One and not One, a paradox in being. And that's only the half of it, maybe only half of the half—my half. We shout and we shut up. We laugh, we paddle. The fuel is a flame that flickers. We give it air, and we trust the flame will not go out. The dramatic tension is internal.

As Robert Heinlein told us in his 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*: "Love is that condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own." So simple—the happiness of the other is essential to our own. Practice it for homework. That's a how-to that bears repeating, on a daily basis. As one wise woman, who outlived three happy husbands, advised: "Find out what he doesn't like, and don't do it."

That's a love story I'd like to report, a story missing in the popular media. As Johnson said: It takes a shift of vision. ●

## Love in Place

I really don't remember falling in love  
all that much

I remember wanting to bake corn  
bread and boil a ham and I  
certainly remember making lemon pie  
and when I used to smoke I  
stopped in the middle of my day to  
contemplate

I see the old photographs and I am  
smiling and I'm sure quite  
happy but what I mostly see is me  
through your eyes  
and I am still young and slim and very  
much committed to the  
love we still have.

—Nikki Giovanni,  
from *Love Poems*